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SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM APPLIED  
Definitions of a Community College

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## ABSTRACT

The value of Continuing Education is increasingly being realised throughout New Zealand. The educational institution termed the Community College is one facility being established in order to further the principles associated with lifelong learning.

This thesis presents an exploratory study related to the first such college built in this country, the Hawke's Bay Community College. The central purpose guiding the study was an attempt to discover how members of the Hawke's Bay region conceive this new institution. Here, what was envisaged as important, was not only the kinds of understandings revealed about the college, but also the attitudes and evaluations expressed by Hawke's Bay citizens regarding it. To this end, the dissertation is divided into a number of parts.

Firstly, there is consideration given to some of the philosophical issues underlying any research process pursued within the social domain. On the basis of this, a theoretically justifiable approach to the problem posed, is elaborated. The theoretical perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, and more particularly, the construct of the Definition of the Situation, are discussed.

From such a base, reference is made to the linkages and translation process required when moving from theoretical to methodological issues. Included in this section of the thesis, is a description of the data collection techniques employed for the study.

The results obtained as a consequence of the investigation are then given, along with some discussion relevant to the Community College's operations.

Finally, the thesis presents a series of tentative hypotheses and questions emergent from the research carried out. It concludes with a reconsideration of the exploratory nature of the problem posed, and the theoretical perspective within which it was couched.

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## INTRODUCTION

If society is to meet the accelerating pace of social and economic change in today's world, Education needs to be viewed as an adjustment process, continuing throughout life, rather than as a preparatory process terminating during or shortly after adolescence. The notion of Continuing Education aspires to such a position.

"The aims of lifelong Education, of which Continuing Education is a part, are to assist all members of the community to adjust to continually changing personal, social and economic circumstances throughout their lives; to control by common decision and action those circumstances which are controllable; and to achieve their maximum personal potential." (New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO, 1972, p.102)

Continuing Education is thus not to be seen as a product, a series of packages, or even as a program, but rather, as a process that attempts to involve society at large continuously, in the development of educational goals. It strives to co-ordinate efforts intended to meet the needs and wants of the people, requiring interaction and general involvement by the community as a whole. Central problems inherent in the Continuing Education process then are, to identify accurately what people want, think they want, and actually do need, and then to structure these into a realistic and concerted series of significant educative activities. Communication, particularly between the educator and the community seems to be the key to the resolution of such problems.

It is within this framework that the New Zealand Education Department has introduced Community Colleges. Such institutions are to be concerned with: firstly, mobilizing the community's resources (particularly people, places and equipment), and linking them with the educational process and existing agencies; secondly, responding to the educational, welfare, cultural and recreational interests of people of all ages in their community; and thirdly, providing advice and guidance to both collectivities and individuals so that their interests, aspirations and consequent lines of action can be appropriately realized.(cf Renwick, 1974) In this way the Community College is both a focal point and a facilitating institution for the already existing learning networks. At the same time it is to develop new facilities, thereby leading to the creation of a new learning community, with the Community College becoming the peoples' college.

The first New Zealand Community College was set up in Hawke's Bay at Otatara, just south of Taradale. The first students were admitted in January, 1975. The college is intended to provide vocationally-oriented services and what has been termed 'Community Studies' services, particularly in those areas not catered for by established institutions. Emphasis is to be given to developing facilities designed to serve the expressed needs of the Hawke's Bay region.

In response to an invitation from the New Zealand Education Department, Massey University agreed to undertake an 'independent' study of the Hawke's Bay Community College during its early years of development. The study reported here is one component of the resulting research project. It is concerned with an exploratory study of what conceptions of the Community College are held by people in the Hawke's Bay region.

The principal reason for the study was, that as participation in the Community College activities must be largely voluntary, unless members of the community become aware of, and to some extent committed to its philosophy, then the Community College will be less able to realize its objectives. In short, the conception of what the Community College is, requires some control by its propounders. Its philosophy needs to be understood and accepted by the community. But such understanding and acceptance may be difficult to achieve. To a large extent they are dependent on the degree to which members of the community and the Community College come to speak each other's language, comprehend each other's meanings, and see through each other's 'glasses'. However, if incompatibilities are to be overcome, they must first be recognized.

The central purpose guiding this dissertation then, is to attempt to discern the nature of the conceptions held and to surface whatever differences, if any, do exist. To this end, it is aiming to:

- (1) Develop a theoretically justifiable approach to the problem posed.
- (2) Pursue the necessary investigation.
- (3) As a result of the research, provide information which could be beneficial to the Community College's functioning in the future.

With such objectives in mind, the study has been structured in the following way. Chapter 1 is a brief exposition of the philosophical issues which underly the theoretical position taken throughout the study, and which are relevant to a scientific exercise in the social domain. In Chapter 2, consideration is given to the theoretical perspective employed, that of Symbolic Interactionism, and more



particularly, to the theoretical model which guided the investigation undertaken. Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the linkages and translation process required when moving from the theoretical to the methodological issues. It also presents a description of the data collection techniques which were used in the investigation. The results of the investigation are given in Chapter 4. The final chapter consists of a discussion of these results, along with a reconsideration of the study as a whole.